

October 26

1962

Memo to: Walt Rostow

From: Daniel Ellsberg

Subject: Advisability of specifying a ^{short} time-limit on the removal of SU offensive force from Cuba

1. In the meeting this morning, there was frequent emphasis on the importance of focussing continually in our planning upon the objective: "The missiles must be ^{go} removed." There was no mention of the possibility or desirability of defining that objective: "The missiles must go by...", or even, "The missiles must go soon," let alone, "immediately." There are disadvantages in omitting such a time constraint, either in our planning assumptions or in US declaratory policy.
2. To the extent that planners do succeed in focussing upon a single, stated main objective, shortcomings in that statement may have a distorting effect on their work: e.g., upon their notions of the range of alternatives that may be considered of roughly comparable effectiveness. In this case, the statement leaves open the inference that the U.S. is indifferent to the speed of removal of the missiles, to the starting date or to the length of the process, so long as they are removed eventually. Are we?
3. To specify a particular date by which decisive actions must have been taken to remove the missiles is to sacrifice US flexibility of action. But is that a disadvantage? Can we afford to allow ourselves as much flexibility of action as was implicit

Reduction ad absurdum of cult of flexibility: flex^{ibility} maximized by total inaction
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in the proposals discussed this morning? How can we generate the foreign anxiety that we are on the verge of decisive unilateral action--stressed by Katzenbach--^{it is evident that we remain "flexible"?} if in fact, ^{How can we communicate a sense of imminent US action if} in our private planning, we have set up no schedules serving to remind us of time urgency, no criteria to tell us that the time of decision has arrived?

5. For example, the aspect of the inexorability in its effects of the POL blockade was always emphasized: "It tightens a noose around their necks; it sets the clock ticking." But the significance of the length of that process was not discussed after I arrived. Would we be just as sanguine about the effectiveness of that move if the Cubans had 6 months supplies on hand? (the process would still be "inexorable")? Is 60 to 90 days--which, as I understand it, is when the alarm should actually ring on this particular clock--just the right amount of time for a process putting pressure on the Cubans: or is it too ^{long} much for our purposes? To answer that, we must face the question more directly whether our "purposes" include a time dimension or not.

Can we really plan to wait 60-90 days for the Cubans or Soviets to decide to comply with our demands? (Incidentally, the blockade is not sustained automatically once we impose it; even the "inexorability" of the slow process is contingent upon our renewing it.)

6. Of course, as someone remarked, the Russians may cooperatively keep up our momentum; ^{they may provide us with the timely provocations to sustain our resolution.} Or they may not. Our statements and our actions (not, by the way, our plans) either will communicate to the Soviets/Cubans that they must take immediate steps to comply, to avert U.S. unilateral action: ^{our statements and actions} or they will communicate something a decision to continue the blockade day by day, in the face of Soviet and perhaps Allied and neutral counterpressures.)

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else. What is it that we want the Soviets and Cubans to hear, in our words and our acts? I would argue that it does not serve our objectives for them to hear: ^{"We have} ~~The U.S. has made up its~~ ^{own} mind that the missiles must go...eventually." That bit of information may have virtually no impact upon them. What I suspect they are listening to learn is: ^{"Are US policy-makers} ~~Is the US going to~~ allow us enough time for us to change their minds?" The discussion this morning--taking only what was actually said, not what may have been implicit in some minds--might well have been reassuring ^{to them} on that crucial point, if they had heard it. Our own private sense of determination that we will take action to remove the missiles "if, in the end, it proves inescapable"--even if this private "decision" were communicated perfectly to the Soviets--would convey to them very little need for prompt action on their part if they suspected that we had placed in our paths ^{no} ~~very few~~ obstacles to ^{our} escape from that onerous task on any particular day. In short, I argue the importance of setting a clock ticking for us, and one with a much shorter alarm date than that of the POL blockade.

7. A plausible criterion for the time-span that should be allowed the Soviets/Cubans (and the US!), ~~fix the maximum at a~~ ^{(that it must be well short of the} ~~maximum,~~ is the time we now estimate it would take for the missile force now on Cuba to reach full operational status. A reasonable public basis (and a sound private one) for our need to put a short time-limit on their compliance is:

"We mean to fulfill our commitment to prevent the establishment of a significant offensive threat to nations of the Extra Western Hemisphere. We do not intend to withdraw from that commitment to a position which would force us to negotiate over the withdrawal of an established, fully operational force, or force us to remove unilaterally an operational force in the face of nuclear threats against ourselves or third parties." *We cannot allow the existing threat by the Soviets that permit the existing missile force on Cuba to reach full operational status.*

8. Proposal: that the US primary objective, both in planning and in public statements, should specify a short time limit for the Soviets and/or Cubans to be well embarked upon the process of dismantling and destroying or embarking their missiles and equipment and offensive bombers: e.g., one week. A limit, at least in planning, should also be set for the completion of that task. Moreover, to support that objective, planning schedules for the various tracks should specify dates for decisive U.S. actions to remove the offensive forces (naturally, events may either speed up or delay such action; I still suggest that it is important that at any given time current planning include a specific, and not far off, date ~~of~~ for the alarm to ring on the U.S. clock). That limit should be announced soon: e.g., today or tomorrow. During the interval, such preparatory actions as massive overflights over the entire island might be taken: for reconnaissance, but even more, to be seen (and perhaps to drop leaflets). *Specific actions for the Soviets, Cubans to take. To comply should be described.*

8. I have not tried to indicate all the pros and cons of this proposal, in particular the possible disadvantages, or to indicate

the myriad planning and preparatory actions that such a taut schedule would impose upon the U.S., or the risks involved. I wished merely to advance the argument, which I feel strongly (and with which Harry Rowen concurs), that we cannot afford to relieve ourselves of such pressures: for to do so is to relieve our antagonists. We should be most wary ~~in~~ that we do not unconsciously make a bargain ~~for~~ with ourselves to spare ourselves ^{by assuring ourselves that we ~~will~~ "decided" to be resolute in the end} the risks and anxieties of forcing the pace; ~~A~~ a conscious sense of satisfaction at having "reached a decision" to take military action against the sites "if and when we have to" could really be founded on our having promised ourselves, unconsciously, that we will not take such an action in the coming week: when it is most anticipated. The consequences, in the course of this coming week, of proving that anticipation unfounded could be fatal to our ultimate objective.

Effect of having overcome an internal obstacle: "reached a decision."